

Voting and Registration, 1998

When elections are over and the results are in, don't think you know the whole story until you have seen the results from the U.S. Census Bureau.

On Election Day, the media looks for quick answers from exit polls conducted outside the voting sites. However, these findings tend to be biased toward certain groups — such as highly educated people who may be more willing to answer questions. Two weeks after Congressional and Presidential elections, the U.S. Census Bureau uses a special November supplement of the Current Population Survey (CPS) to find out who casts a ballot and why others do not. The CPS provides a more accurate picture because it makes use of a nationally representative sample with very high response rates.

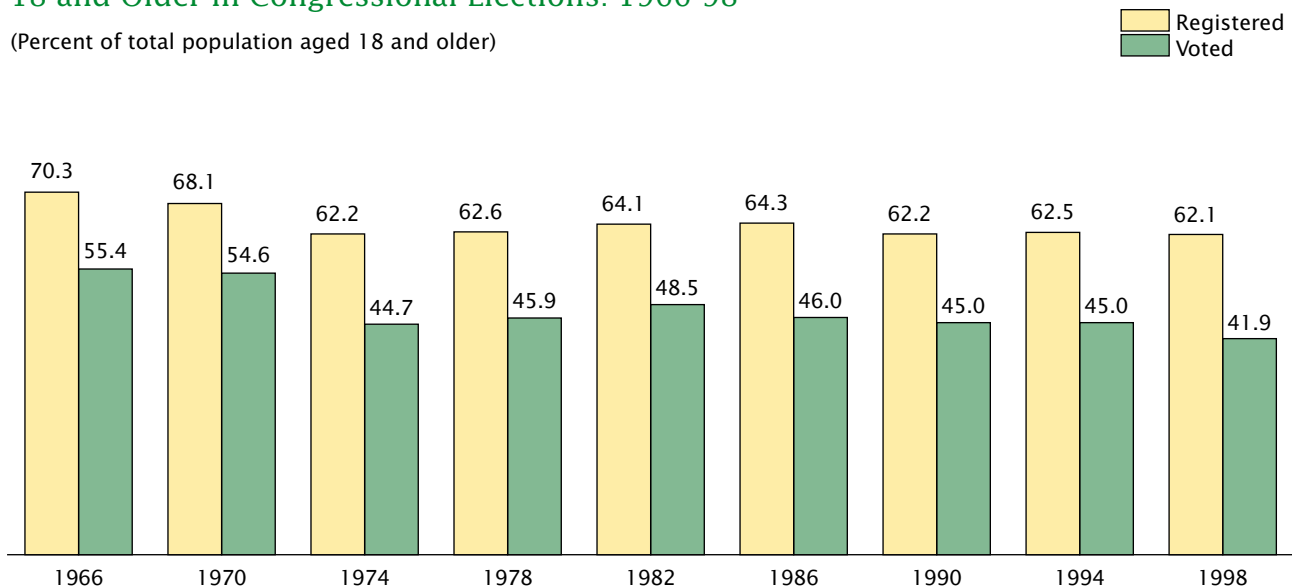
Words That Count

- **Voting and registration rates** have been based on citizens aged 18 and older since 1994. Previously, they were based on the total resident population aged 18 and older, including noncitizens — referred to as the **voting-age population** in this report. This change raises the 1998-voting rate for the population as a whole — from 42 to 45 percent — but affects some population segments more than others. The voter turnout levels for both Hispanics and Asians and Pacific Islanders increases nearly 13 percentage points when citizens are used as the base instead of the total voting-age population. However, because all data collected prior to 1994 uses total voting-age population, these data are used for historical comparisons in this report.

Figure 11-1.

Registration and Voting Rates Among the Resident Population Aged 18 and Older in Congressional Elections: 1966-98

(Percent of total population aged 18 and older)



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Surveys, November 1966 to November 1998.

The vote is in for the 2000 Presidential elections and the Census Bureau is currently processing these data. At the time of this publication, however, the most recent information available on voting and registration patterns is from the 1998 Congressional elections. Although Congressional elections typically have lower turnouts than elections where voters select a President, the data indicate significant long-term trends in U.S. voting patterns.

About 198 million people, 62 percent of the voting-age population, reported that they were registered to vote in 1998 — not significantly different from the 1990 and 1994 Congressional elections. However, only 42 percent of the voting-age population reported voting in the 1998 Congressional election, compared with 45 percent of the population in the previous Congressional election in 1994. This turnout is the lowest recorded since the Census Bureau began collecting voting data in the CPS in 1966. Between 1994 and 1998, the number of people who showed up at the polls declined from 86 million to 83 million. Turnout declined for people of all ages, for both men and women, and for White non-Hispanics.

Between 1994 and 1998, the drop in participation rates among the voting-age population was greater for some groups than others.

The voting rate is much higher among older people than younger people and the decline affected young voters more than the older ones. Among those aged 18 to 24, there was a 3 percentage-point decline, compared with a 2 percentage-point decline among the population aged 65 and older.

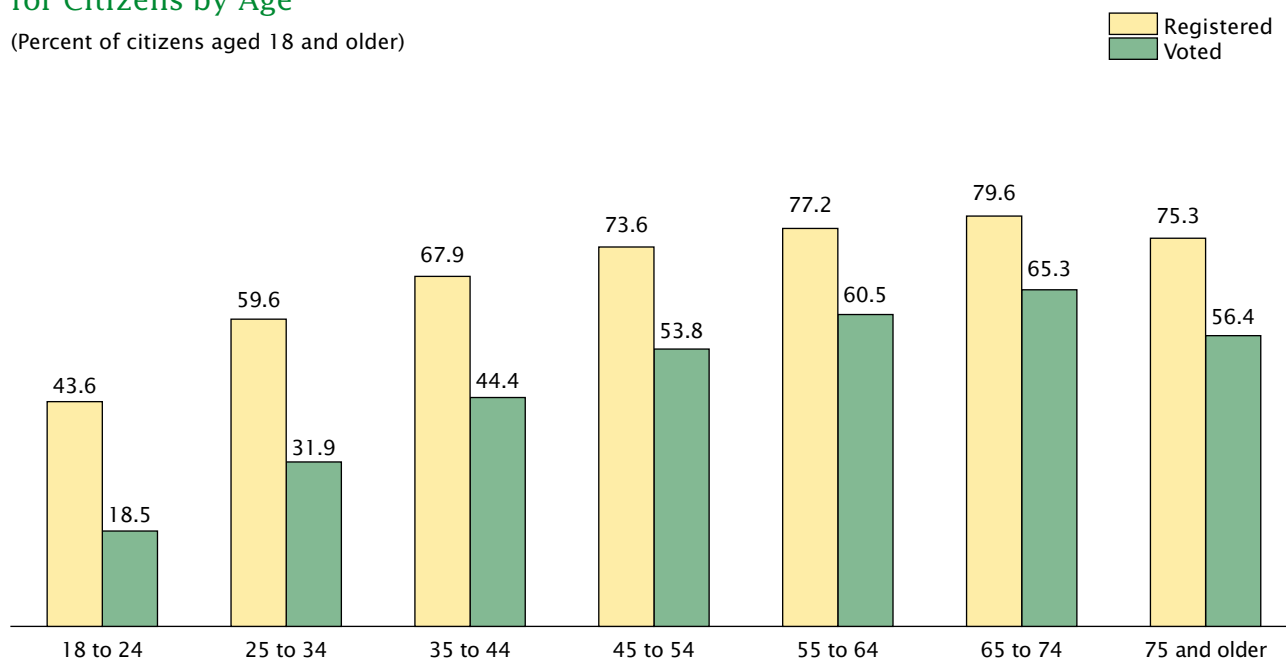
Among citizens in 1998, the peak ages for voter participation were 65 to 74. More than two-thirds of the citizens in this age group voted. Even among the group aged 75 and older more than half voted. The lowest voting rates were among 18- to 24-year-old citizens. Only 18 percent of this group made it to the voting booths in 1998.

The share of White non-Hispanic citizens who voted (47 percent), represented a 4 percentage-point decline from the previous Congressional election. In contrast to the general trend of declining voter participation,

Figure 11-2.

Registration and Voting Rates in the 1998 Congressional Election for Citizens by Age

(Percent of citizens aged 18 and older)



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Survey, November 1998.

the percentage of Black non-Hispanic citizens who voted rose 3 percentage points to 42 percent. Among citizens, the share of Hispanics¹ and Asian and Pacific Islander non-Hispanics who voted was 33 percent and 32 percent, respectively.

In 1998, citizens with more education, higher incomes, and employment voted at higher rates than others. Also, homeowners and long-time residents were more likely to vote than people who were renters or recent movers. When these characteristics were taken into account, racial differences diminished. For instance, even though Black non-Hispanics were significantly less likely to vote than White non-Hispanics, voting patterns became similar when people shared characteristics, such as age, educational attainment, family income, and tenure.

The 1998 CPS asked people why they did not vote.

Of the 40 million registered voters who did not vote, about one-third claimed they were too busy or had conflicting work or school schedules. Another 13 percent did not vote because they were not interested or felt their vote would not make a difference. Eleven percent reported illness, disability, or a family emergency and about 8 percent said they were out of

town. Other specified reasons for not voting included not liking the candidates or campaign issues (6 percent), forgetting (5 percent), confusion about registration (4 percent), and transportation problems (2 percent).

The Census Bureau Can Tell You More

- For more detailed information, consult the following U.S. Census Bureau Current Population Report: *Voting and Registration in the Election of November 1998* by Jennifer C. Day and Avalaura L. Gaither.
- Look for complete reports and detailed tables on the Census Bureau's World Wide Web site (www.census.gov). Click on "V" and select "Voting and Registration Data."
- Contact the Census Bureau's Education and Social Stratification Branch at 301-457-2422 or e-mail pop@census.gov.
- For information on publications and other resources, see Appendix A.

¹ Hispanics may be of any race.